

# Biking to Florida's Future

Two Days on the Pinellas Trail

By Herb Hiller

*Periodically, Land&People asks a writer to travel a trail TPL is helping to create.*

**E**arly on a fall Saturday morning, I swung my bike onto the Pinellas Trail near downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. A handlebar bag and rear rack held my belongings for a two-day ride. Stretching more than 33 miles north from St. Petersburg to Tarpon Springs, through one of Florida's most urbanized coastal counties, the Pinellas Trail is one of the nation's most successful rail trails. An energetic cyclist could easily complete the distance in a day, but my mission was to explore how the trail had positively transformed the communities it traversed. I'd be traveling about three-quarters of the trail, stopping overnight along the way and talking to a variety of people about the trail's impact.

Midway up Florida's west coast, Pinellas County is flanked by Tampa Bay to the east and the Gulf of Mexico to



Threading Florida's most urbanized county, the Pinellas Trail celebrates its railroad origins with whimsical signage, top. Above: Businesses thrive along the trail.

the west. Like all of urban Florida the county's population is growing quickly, from 850,000 when the trail opened in 1990 to 925,000 today. The trail links the county's richly varied communities and attractions, threading not only parks, scenic coasts, remnant groves of oaks draped in Spanish moss, waterways, and tidal streams, but also homey suburbs, gritty urban areas, and vibrant downtowns.

I felt exhilarated as I rode along, legs steadily pumping, the paved corridor, like a river, defying the orderly roadway grid. Fifteen feet wide, the trail offered plenty of room for the universe of trail users that swept past: walkers, joggers, skating kids, casual cyclists, spandex-clad road racers. One man pedaled while exercising his dog. Moms pushed infants in baby carriages. Seniors, who once made St. Petersburg and its green benches syn-



onymous with sedentary retirement, were out in force and in motion.

Walking or riding the trail provides a far different experience from driving on the busy highways that bracket it. Trail users pass walls of murals showcasing wildlife and human diversity. I'm sure mine wasn't the only nose tickled by bacon smells wafting from kitchen windows in the still-early morning, and that I wasn't alone eyeing grapefruit that hung over a fence for easy picking. Railroad buff that I am, I pictured myself as a diesel engine, legs propelling bike wheels where trains once rolled. I loved coming around bends. I loved the easy grade.

I soon passed beneath a colorful sculpture announcing that I was in Gulfport, due west of St. Petersburg. Modeled on historic railroad signals, whimsical markers



ANNE NELSON





MICHAEL BAGBY/TREBLE HOOK DESIGN

"The trail going directly through town turns out to be a big asset," says Geraldine Campos, the city's director of economic development and housing.

## By the Numbers: AMERICA'S RAIL TRAILS

Number of trails completed on former rail corridors in the U.S.: **1,359**

Total mileage of those trails: **13,150**

Additional rail trails in the project phase of development: **1,172**

Number of the 50 U.S. states having at least one rail trail: **50**

Ranks of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota among states in total rail trail miles: **1, 2, and 3**

Length in miles of Missouri's Katy Trail State Park, the nation's longest rail trail: **225**

Number of annual users on Virginia's W&OD Railroad Trail, the nation's most visited rail trail: **3 million**

Average smiles-per-mile of U.S. rail trail users: **inestimable**

Source: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, [www.railtrails.org](http://www.railtrails.org)

Trailside homes feature gates in their fences for easy on-and-off access. Shops offer trailside doorways to attract walkers and cyclists.

such as this one announce each of the trail's eight towns: St. Petersburg, Gulfport, Seminole, Largo, Clearwater, Dunedin, Palm Harbor, and Tarpon Springs at the northern end.

Lovers strolled hand in hand across the half-mile-long Cross Bayou Bridge—built especially for the trail above a tidal inlet north of Gulfport. Oyster beds carpeted the shallows below and kayakers floated among the mangroves. Anhingas, ubiquitous black waterbirds, perched on pilings and spread their wings wide to dry.

Before the trail went in, this old railroad corridor was a north-south rash of neglect. The Western Rail Line, which operated for nearly a century, was abandoned in the early 1980s. People tossed trash and brush onto the tracks and erected sheds along the corridor. A lumber company fenced off part of it for security.

After Florida's Department of Transportation acquired the corridor in 1983, a group of cyclists proposed a bikeway. Since 1988, the corridor has been managed by the county, which now owns it outright. Twice voters have approved taxes to pay for construction of what is more completely known as the Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail (for a retired county manager who championed its funding). Currently the Trust for Public Land is working to acquire a rail corridor that would connect the trail, which now ends at the outskirts of St. Petersburg, directly to downtown. (See sidebar, page 45.)

The trail clusters activity and affects how people live. At least six bike shops have opened along its length. Trailside homes feature gates in their fences for easy on-and-off access. Shops offer trailside doorways to attract walkers and cyclists. A McDonald's proclaims itself the "McDonald's on the trail."

According to Jerry Cumings, county manager of the trail since its opening, the path gets a million users each year. A third of them use the trail to commute to work

*Continued on page 50*

## HELPING TO BUILD FLORIDA'S RAIL TRAIL NETWORK

**P**inellas is only one of Florida's many rail trails. With 397 miles of rail trails open and another 420 additional miles in planning or under construction, the Sunshine State is a nationally recognized leader in recycling abandoned rail corridors.

But sorting out the complex issues surrounding ownership, real-estate valuation, and permitted uses of corridors is difficult, especially for municipalities with limited expertise and budgets. TPL-Florida has been assisting several communities around the state as they seek to acquire corridors for trails—negotiating with landowners and helping determine the most feasible rail trail projects.

- In **St. Petersburg**, community leaders are excited about a TPL-assisted effort to leverage the great success of the Pinellas Trail by linking it directly to downtown via a two-mile connector on a former railroad corridor. "We expect that the trail extension will improve the quality of life within—and expand transportation alternatives into—the downtown area," says Joe Kubicki, director of the city's transportation planning office. "This will encourage investment and revitalization."
- Just south of St. Petersburg, TPL last year acquired a 13-mile segment of the old CSX Transportation, Inc., line and conveyed it to **Sarasota County**. The route once carried circus trains to the winter home of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Now it will support a new bicycle and pedestrian trail linking the city of Sarasota to its nearby communities of Laurel, Nokomis, and Venice. "The CSX corridor will tie together Venice and Sarasota and provide access to three different parks and several excellent trail-



TPL is working to link the Pinellas Trail directly to downtown St. Petersburg along this former rail corridor.



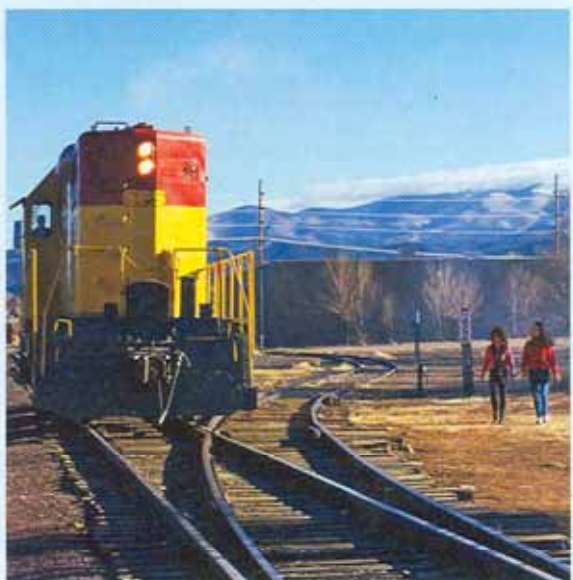
The Tallahassee/St. Marks Historic Rail Trail, which TPL is helping to connect to Florida State University.

heads," says Sarasota County Commissioner David Mills. The project required a solid two years of TPL staff work, including legal and regulatory research, surveys, title work, environmental assessments, and financial negotiations.

- In the central Florida community of **Leesburg**, TPL recently helped the town acquire two railway corridors, totaling 6.5 miles, that cross one another in the shape of an X. Adjacent to the high school, a lake, and downtown, the corridor will become part of an envisioned Leesburg Greenway Trail, which will connect neighborhoods and parks, pass a restored 1912 train depot, and link to other county trail systems. Jay Evans, Leesburg deputy city manager, calls the acquisition "a major step toward realizing Leesburg's goal of an interconnected system of trails and bikeways as a regional recreational amenity for Leesburg families."
- In the state capital, **Tallahassee**, TPL recently acquired a rail corridor that will help connect bustling Florida State University to the Tallahassee/St. Marks Historic Rail Trail, which runs 19 miles along one of Florida's oldest rail corridors to the Gulf of Mexico community of St. Marks.
- In **Gainesville**, TPL is currently working to acquire a three-mile corridor that will extend the popular Gainesville-Hawthorne State Trail from its current terminus at the south edge of the city through the city center to the University of Florida campus, connecting the campus to downtown.

## Olympic Discovery Trail, Washington

What began as a coast-hugging passenger train route along the northern perimeter of the Olympic Peninsula has become one of the most beautiful rail trails in the nation. Running between Port Angeles and Port Townsend, the trail affords views of Vancouver Island, the San Juan Islands, the Cascade Mountains, and the Olympic Range. In 1991 the Peninsula Trails Coalition kicked off its effort to create the 25-mile hiking and biking trail when TPL acquired a key seven-acre property in Sequim along the Dungeness River. Featuring a restored, 500-foot trestle bridge and an Audubon center, the park now serves as an unofficial trail headquarters. TPL is currently working to protect additional land along the trail.



ERIC SWANSON



BYRON JORDAN



## Santa Fe Rail Trail, New Mexico

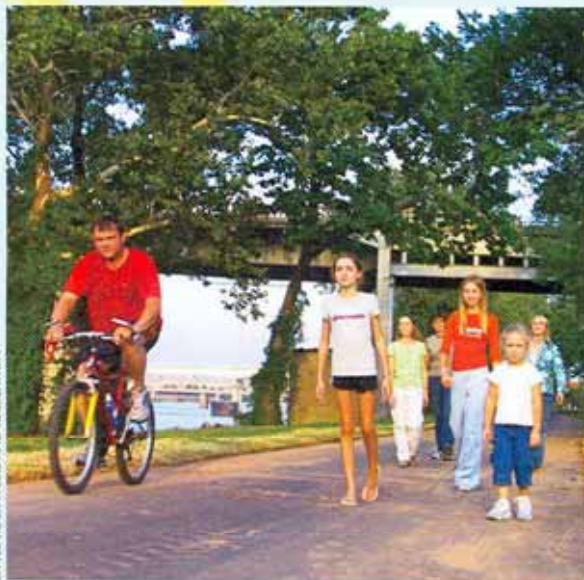
Running south from the heart of Santa Fe, a scenic rail corridor is destined for double duty as a recreation trail and commuter railroad that may help relieve some of the growing region's traffic congestion. The 18-mile corridor was purchased by the state in early 2005 with TPL's help and using federal and state funds. Plans call for a pedestrian and bike path from the downtown Santa Fe Railyard (a future park site that TPL helped the city acquire in 1995 and is now designing and developing), along the Acequia Madre (a historic irrigation ditch) and the rail corridor, into the suburbs south of the city. Eventually the corridor will support commuter transit to fast-growing communities as far south as Albuquerque.

## Little Rock Millennium Trail, Arkansas

Also known as the Arkansas River Trail, the Millennium Trail already extends more than 11 miles and has become an important recreational resource for both Little Rock and North Little Rock, just across the river. In March 2005, TPL was pleased to help add a crucial segment to the trail: more than a half mile of abandoned rail corridor that connects the trail to downtown Little Rock's historic Riverfront Park and the dramatic new Clinton Presidential Center and Park, where trail users can now cross the river on a former Rock Island Line railroad bridge. Eventually the Millennium Trail will extend 14.5 miles on both sides of the river, from Little Rock International Airport in the east to Pinnacle Mountain State Park in the west.



CARTER SHERLINE



LITTLE ROCK PARKS AND RECREATION

### Southeast Michigan Millennium Greenway Trail

The counties of southeast Michigan are crisscrossed with rail corridors that once serviced the heavy industries in and around Detroit. Today an effort is under way to turn miles of former railroad corridor, along with riverside property and utility corridors, into a network of greenways and trails. The Southeast Michigan Millennium Greenway Trail system will link the old urban centers with outlying suburbs and picturesque small towns, supporting recreation and alternative transportation for commuters, pedestrians, cyclists, skaters—even equestrians in some locations. Over the last few years TPL has acquired 33 miles of rail corridor for the trail system.



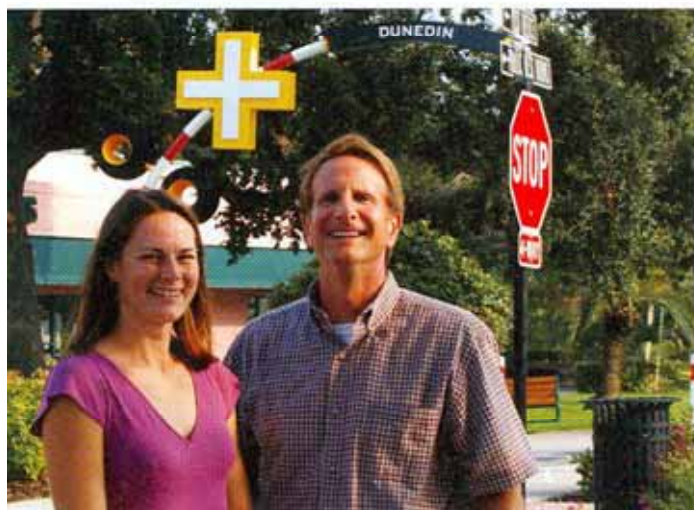
ERNEST BRAUN

### Wallkill Valley Rail Trail, New Paltz, New York

For more than a century after the Civil War, the Wallkill Valley Railroad carried passengers and freight through its namesake valley in the shadow of the Shawangunk Mountains, about 90 miles north of New York City. But the tracks were torn up in the early 1980s, and soon residents began to envision a 12-mile trail past the historic stone homes and through the valley's orchards, fields, and forested glens. In 1990, TPL assisted the Wallkill Valley Land Trust, the town of New Paltz, and the nearby village of New Paltz with the complex purchase of the corridor. Volunteers formed the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association to maintain and promote the new trail, which opened in 1991. TPL continues to protect land in and around the Shawangunk Mountains and elsewhere in the New York/New Jersey Highlands.



A mural along the Finellas Trail in Clearwater celebrates the community's history



TPL's Becky Bremser, shown with Bob Ironsmith, Dunedin community redevelopment director.

### Fast Facts: ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF TRAILS

Number of visitors annually to the 22-mile Mineral Wells to Weatherford Rail Trail near Dallas, Texas: **300,000**

Local revenues generated by those visits: **\$2 million**

Reported increase in local sales tax receipts following the opening of the 11-mile Mineral Belt Trail in Leadville, Colorado: **19 percent**

Economic impact of the Great Allegheny Passage rail trail in 1998, when the central Pennsylvania trail was only half complete: **\$14 million**

Annual visits to Little Miami Scenic Trail, which spans four Ohio counties: **15,000**

Average spending by each of those 15,000 visitors for food, beverages, and transportation: **\$13.54**

Estimated number of new jobs created after the mile-long Mispillion River Greenway created convenient pedestrian access to downtown Millford, Delaware: **250**

Rank, behind highway access, of jogging and bike trails among 18 community amenities cited as reasons for buying a home in a 2002 study of recent home buyers: **2**

Average difference in selling price of home lots on the Mountain Bay Trail in Brown County, Wisconsin, over similar lots not on the trail: **9 percent**

Amount developers added to the price of new homes because they were on a greenway in Apex, North Carolina: **\$5,000**

Sources: Various, collected in *Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways* (2003), the Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, [www.trailsandgreenways.org](http://www.trailsandgreenways.org).

Fifteen hundred visitors show up in Dunedin on weekends. "The trail has become the mother tree of the town," Bob Ironsmith says.

or to shop. "Those people save a lot of gas," Cumings says. "That's a lot of local transportation. If folks get tired, they put their bike on a bus." The system of bikes-on-buses is only one aspect of trail use explained in a free pocket guide published by the county, which also details rest stops, service stations, restaurants, pay phones, bike shops, park areas, and much more along the entire length of the trail.

Clearwater, which I reached at midday, provided a good view of Florida in transition. In recent decades, its downtown, like many others, has lost out economically to the city's beach district. But downtown Clearwater will soon have a heartbeat again, according to Geraldine Campos, the city's director of economic development and housing, who showed me around. Fifteen hundred new residential units are planned. An architecturally acclaimed library has gone up. A sculpture garden has replaced a dank alley. A master streetscape plan is being implemented, and the bayfront Coachman Park will triple in size. A spur from the Pinellas Trail links downtown to Clearwater's popular beach, three miles away. "The trail going directly through town turns out to be a big asset," Campos says.

But no community along the trail has fared better than little Dunedin, the next town to the north. Before the trail opened, a third of the Main Street shops were empty. Today the place is thriving, says Bob Ironsmith, a planner and former developer who became community redevelopment director in 1995. While it is county policy to close the trail at dusk, the town of Dunedin has assumed liability so as to keep its part of the path open at night, when all downtown is festively lit. To tame traffic, Main Street has been reduced from four lanes to two. Utilities are going underground. On Fridays local farmers purvey organic produce in a restored park. Fifteen hundred visitors now show up on weekends, and almost 120,000 a year visit Dunedin for special events. New apartments and town homes are being built. "The



The Pinellas Trail currently ends at Tarpon Springs, although future funding could extend it eastward and then south toward St. Petersburg, creating an 80-mile loop.

trail has become the mother tree of the town,” Ironsmith says. “Everything has branched out from it.”

Near Dunedin, I stayed the night at Green Gables Bed and Breakfast, which advertises its location as a half-block from the trail. Olivier Grielen, who runs the inn with his wife, Frania, cycles the trail to work as a physical therapist at a Clearwater hospital. His wife says that a week doesn’t go by without at least one couple staying at the inn with their bikes.

Sunday morning, after a double helping of breakfast home fries with yams, I was on the trail again headed for its end at Tarpon Springs, a colorful community since Greek immigrants began harvesting sponges here at the turn of the 20th century. But despite its location on the gulf and the tourist appeal of its sponge docks, the town still awaits renewal. This could depend on passage of a new county referendum, perhaps as early as 2008, to fund the extension of the trail eastward and then loop it back south toward

St. Petersburg on an interior route. Tarpon could become the halfway point on an 80-mile bike loop and perhaps enjoy a revival like Dunedin’s.

Pinellas Trail advocates also are working to link the trail to other existing and planned trails that in the next decade could carry cyclists some 300 miles, from St. Petersburg northward across the state to Palatka on the St. Johns River, near my home. Still other planned trails would link to St. Augustine, the Kennedy Space Center, and Orlando in a 500-mile loop.

In the meantime, I’m happy to be pedaling this trail to Florida’s future. As the state becomes increasingly urban, trails like this one will give all Floridians more to love in this place we call home.

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*Herb Hiller is an observer, critic, and writer about tourism. His new book, Highway A1A, Florida at the Edge (University Press of Florida, 2005), reviews tourism, development, and the emergence of year-round Florida downtowns.*



Will Forney

Bolinas, California

## PHOTO CONTEST 2005

### *The Results Are In!*

Thanks to all who sent in their entries for TPL's *Land&People* photo contest. We asked for your best images that capture the special connection between people and land in any of the environments where TPL works—city parks and gardens, natural lands, farms, ranches, working forests, coasts, waterways, and watersheds. It was hard to choose from the many fine photos we received, but the more we looked at them, the more we kept coming back to these three. We hope you enjoy them, too.